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SUBJECT: BULGARIANS LOOK FORWARD TO U.S. BOOTS ON THE GROUND

Classified By: CDA Alex Karagiannis, reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Prime Minister Stanishev's Chief of Staff, Philip Bokov, told the Charge' August 17 that Bulgaria looks forward to completing the 13 implementing agreements necessary for U.S. forces to begin rotating into Bulgaria on a regular basis. We told Bokov to expect a EUCOM negotiating team in late September. In response to his question about when U.S. forces might begin to arrive, we said that we hoped to have a first training rotation in mid-2007; we would work closely on timing and deployment to ensure political, optical, and substantive success.

¶2. (C) Both sides agreed that negotiation of the implementing arrangements would not present any political problems, but would be labor intensive, especially on the Bulgarian side. U.S. experts have a great deal of experience with such agreements, but the Bulgarian side would have to staff the agreements within and among a number of different ministries.

"The sooner we get started, the better," Bokov said. Ministries are extremely busy preparing for Bulgaria's EU accession and might therefore need additional time to study the agreements and provide input.

¶3. (C) Bokov said Bulgaria would like to keep the discussion of implementing agreements as low-profile as possible, especially during the current political season -- presidential elections take place October 22. Though technical in nature, elements of the implementing agreements could be misrepresented by groups such as the radical nationalist party Ataka to try to score political points in the run-up to the election.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: The Bulgarian government is anxious to see American boots on the ground, which means signing the necessary implementing agreements as soon as possible. As Bokov hinted, however, getting there will require some patience and discretion on the U.S. side. Bulgaria's lack of experience, its government-wide focus on EU accession, and its sometimes dysfunctional inter-agency process may prove frustrating at times for U.S. experts, but the political will to sign these agreements is clearly present.

KARAGIANNIS